

Bill limits columns from profs

By Jonathan Shorman
Jonathan.Shorman@cjournal.com

Professors and other university employees wouldn't be able to criticize or praise lawmakers, the governor or other elected officials in letters to the editor if they use their official titles, under a bill introduced in the Legislature.

House Bill 2234 would require the governing boards of community colleges and state universities to implement policies prohibiting employees from providing

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titles when authoring or contributing to newspaper opinion columns, which includes letters, op-eds and editorials.

The bill comes from the House Local Government Committee, but has been referred to the House Education Committee.

The original source of the legislation remains a mystery, however.

Local Government Chairman Rep. Steve Huebert, R-Valley Center, said the bill had been offered to the committee by Rep. Virgil Peck, R-Tyro.

Peck initially said he hadn't offered the bill. But after being told Huebert had said he had offered it, his answer changed.

"I introduce bills in committee sometimes when I'm asked out of courtesy. It's not because I have any skin

in the game or I care about it. I'm not even sure I introduced it, but if he said I did, I did," Peck said.

While bills may be introduced by individual lawmakers, committee bills aren't uncommon. Peck's comments came after Thursday's House session as he was leaving the chamber. Before he left, however, Peck had been speaking on the House floor to Rep. Joe Seiwert, R-Pretty Prairie, who is chairman of the House Utilities and Telecommunications Committee. Peck and Seiwert could be heard speaking about the legislation.

Asked about the conversation, Seiwert accused a reporter of eavesdropping, but did answer questions.

"There's 100 newspaper articles printed bashing people and using the university name and if I work for John Deere, AT&T, or what-

Snyder later apologized. The legislation wouldn't have affected Snyder's appearance in the ad.

The bill prohibits the use of university titles in newspaper opinion articles only when the subject matter concerns a current elected official, a candidate for office or a matter pending before the Legislature or another public body in the state.

Employees could still use their titles when opining on other topics.

Rep. John Carmichael, D-Wichita, expressed concern the legislation could have constitutional problems and would potentially limit public debate. He also questioned why the legislation is limited to college and university employees and doesn't extend to other state employees.

The public tends to accept the opinions of academics with more credence

than editorial boards, Carmichael said.

"If you are in fact a professor at The University of Kansas, that is part of your identity and part of your resume," Carmichael said. "To muzzle an academic in identifying him or herself, and their accomplishment, not only does it have the effect of denying them their right to free speech, it also denies the public the right to understand who is commenting and what their, perhaps, bias or interest might be."

Fort Hays State University political science professor Chapman Rackaway said the bill appeared targeted toward Insight Kansas, a group of professors who pen regular columns for newspapers on Kansas politics that includes Rackaway. During election season last year, Insight Kansas also tracked and analyzed political polls.

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